



Research Paper

## Cultural Syncretism and Islam: The Potential of Islam to Accommodate Alien Practices With Reference To the Ritual of *Nercha* and the Institution of *Marumakkathayam*

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**ABSTRACT:** *One of the favourable factors for the advent of Islam in Malabar was its location on the main route of the Indian Ocean trade during the early centuries of the Christian era. The Arabs, who carried out the overseas trade between the Eastern World and the West, frequented Kerala coasts and established temporary commercial settlements there. These Arab traders were responsible for the introduction of Islam in the land. The Sufi missionaries and Sayyids who accompanied these traders played a major role in the emergence and consolidation of the Muslim community in the land. They proselytized many natives into the fold of Islam. Most of these converts embraced the new creed not because of their conviction of its doctrinal aspects, but they found it as an asylum to escape from the agonies and trauma they endured because of their low status in the caste hierarchy. Lack of proper training in the religious scriptures coupled with the indifference and ineptitude of the new entrants made them retaining many of their old socio-religious rituals and practices in the new religion also. Gradually, some of these customs and practices were given an Islamic re-orientation and became part of the Islamic social system in the region. They came to be presented as Islamic rituals and practices. Marumakkathayam (matrilineal system of inheritance) and nercha (religious vow to commemorate saints and martyrs) are such new customs inched into the Muslim community in Malabar. While the former is a social custom, the latter belongs to the category of sacred rites having both dogmatic and social implications. This paper is an ethnographic account of these two social customs and purports to delineate the social background of its accommodation by the native Mappilas.*

**KEY WORDS:** *nercha , jaram, varavu, marumakkathayam, tharavad*

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### I. INTRODUCTION

The Islamic religion is considered as a monolithic doctrine whose fundamental dogmas and principles are accepted and practiced comprehensively by Muslims throughout the world. The central principles like the Oneness of God, the prophethood of Mohammed, belief in the divine revelations, practice of daily *Namaz*, fasting in the month *Ramadhan*, compulsory charity (*Zakat*), pilgrimage to Makkah etc. are accepted and observed by Muslims as a whole. Besides the fundamental doctrines, Islam sets forth some other related dogmas and rituals too which are also obligatory for all its followers to adhere. The believers living in the multi-religious societies are often exhorted and insisted by imams to maintain 'Islamic identity' and keep away from accretions and insertions of foreign ideas into its ideological framework and rituals. Nevertheless in practice, it is perceived that Islamic societies in many parts of the world are evolved as a mixture of dogmatic Islam and many of the traditions and values of the local social practices.

Basically, when people of different social, cultural and religious backgrounds embraced Islam they retained many of their old customs and values in the new religion also. Many of the traditions and customs transmitted by preceding generations remained with them even after their adoption of the new Faith. Significantly, in the long history of Islamic communities across the world, it is a fact that most of the conversions have occurred not because of the conviction of the rationale of the tenets and dogmas of Islam, but largely on account of the various political, social and economic pressures and compulsions. Material benefits,

desire for power and positions, fear of the security of life and property and the propensity to escape from the sufferings and hardships of the day-to-day life were very often the causes for many proselytizations. In the region of Malabar (the Muslim dominated region in the western coast of the Indian sub-continent) also, the situation is not different, as many indigenous pre-Islamic customs and mores have been found assimilated into Islamic community during the course of its consolidation.

## **II. THE SOCIAL FORMATION OF THE MAPPILA COMMUNITY**

The Muslim society in Malabar region consists of two distinct groups: the wealthy expatriate Arab mercantile class who were responsible for the introduction of the religion in the land; and the second, the *Mappilas*, the new entrants into Islam who were the offspring of the marriage between the Arabs with local women as well as the converts from the native Hindu population. The former who were traders by profession settled down in the coastal towns, and preached and practiced the religion exactly as they had experienced in their homeland<sup>1</sup>. The new converts who lived in close contacts with them were eager to imitate them in the religious practice. But the case of the ordinary *Mappilas*, the bulk of whom lived in the interior part of Malabar, was different. The classical dogmas of Islam proved unable to communicate to these *Mappilas* properly. While the 'urban' Muslims observed the religion in its unblemished purity, the 'rural' *Mappilas* who knew very little about the scriptures and doctrines adhered to indigenous folk traditions and rituals. It is a fact that the *Mappila* community could evolve its own variant of Islam which had the capability to accommodate themselves to indigenous versions of faith and rituals. In other words, the religion of Islam as practiced by the Arabs was transformed into a dynamic, flexible and syncretic *Mappila* variant as a result of its interaction with indigenous cultural ethos and their assimilation and integration into its framework.

The major reason for the adaptation of alien practices into Islam was the socio-cultural conditions under which the *Mappilas* lived, the majority of whom being converts from the lower caste Hindus found Islam as an asylum to escape from the agonies and torments caused by the caste system<sup>2</sup>. The caste system had insisted many taboos and restrictions in the social interactions of these people, which were the tools in the hands of the Brahmins to exploit the lower castes that were known as *untouchables*. To escape these social stigmas, hardships and discriminations, the only way opened before the tenants was to convert either to Islam or to Christianity. The lower class looked upon Islam as a chance to win social freedom that was denied to them by the Brahmanism. Since the Muslims had no problem of untouchability, they made close contact with the low castes who were employed in various professions. At the same time the low castes worked more freely under their *Mappila* masters than under Brahmins or *Nayars*. This induced them to accept the religion of their masters. For the lower Hindu castes, the acceptance of Islam meant an escape from their degraded status they had in the Hindu society; at least theoretically they got equality in the new religion. These favourable circumstances were wisely utilized by the Arab Sufi saints and *Sayyids* who were the propagators of Islam in Malabar. Islam provided to the downtrodden classes an ideology that was based on equality, justice and brotherhood for which the Kerala people had been yearning for many centuries.

The conversion of the large number of the followers of the Hindu religion, most of them illiterate, into the fold of Islam led to the evolution of a distinct *Mappila* community which was socially and culturally distinguished from the other Islamic communities, as they retained of some of their pre-Islamic customs and practices even after their conversion. In many areas of social life the *Mappilas* are found to have absorbed various customs and practices of traditional Kerala culture including such customs as tying the *tali* round the neck of brides in marriage ceremonies, paying dowry to the bridegroom and purifactory ablutions after birth [1]. The cultural practices of *Mappilas* like use of music, tom-toms, and exchange of betels (tobacco) in ceremonies are borrowings from Hindu lower castes. The festival of *Nercha* and the institution of *marumakkathayam* are two important such social customs which edged into the *Mappila* society as part of their pre-Islamic cultural heritage.

## **III. NERCHA AS RITUAL AND FESTIVAL**

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<sup>1</sup> Calicut, Weliancode, Tirurangadi, Tanur, Ponnani, Parappanangadi, Paravanna, the localities surrounding Chaliyam port, Kakkad, Thikkodi, other localities surrounding Pantalayani, Kannur, Edakkad, Thiruvangad, Mahe, Chemmanad were the important coastal spots which became thickly populated and grew into towns with thriving trade and commerce.

<sup>2</sup> Casteism is a peculiar social institution in India by which the Hindus were divided into four major castes and within them innumerable sub castes. Brahmins, Kshathriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras were the caste groupings. Caste identity was based on one's birth and one cannot change it as per his choice. In Kerala Nambudiris, Nayars, Ezhavas, Cherumans, Pulayans, Kanakkans etc. are the major caste groups.

The term *nercha* means ‘vow’ or ‘oath’. It is a firm determination or vow on the part of a believer to perform a good deed in the path of God, seeking His satisfaction and blessing, like voluntary fasting, performing permissible pilgrimages, reciting Quran, financial or other kinds of assistance to the needy etc. Though it is an important rite and act of worship according to Islamic jurisprudents and scholars, it is not a compulsory rite. But if one decides to perform anything of that kind it becomes compulsory for him and neglect of it invites the displeasure of God. Generally the believers perform such vows in order to obtain worldly fortunes or for healing from diseases.

In Malabar, *nercha* has a social and cultural facet than its theological dimension. Here, *nercha* is definitely not Islamic rite; rather it’s a large public festival in which people, irrespective of castes and creeds, actively participate. They are celebrated in commemoration of the deceased saints or *Sayyids* or martyrs<sup>3</sup>(*shahid*) on the anniversaries of their deaths. Usually It starts with the prayers at the tomb of an *awliya*<sup>4</sup>and outside the *jaram*<sup>5</sup> it was developed into a great social and cultural fest with great pomp and splendor. The *nercha* encompasses expensive ceremonials having the features of indigenous folk traditions and rituals..*Nerchas* usually begin with the rituals like prayers for the dead, recitation of Quran and *maulid*<sup>6</sup>and singing of verses dedicated to Abd al Qadir Jilani, the renowned Sufi saint lived in Iraq, and then, they progress into great festivals including play of music, use of fireworks, carnivals fairs etc., attracting huge gatherings. The *nerchas* were the occasions of entertainments and merry making in which peoples of all walks of life, irrespective of religion or caste, had active participation. Most of the *nerchas* lasted for two to three days. The most prominent *nerchas* of Malabar are of Kondotty, Malappuram, Pookkottur, Koottayi, Mamburam, Mananthala near Chavakkad and Idiyangara in Calicut. Though the saints commemorated through the *nerchas* are different, the pattern of ceremonies is found to be almost similar and homogenous.

The legitimacy for the *nerchas* derives from the instruction of Prophet Muhammed to the believers for visiting (*ziyarat*) the graves and praying for the dead souls. The *ziyarat* is meant for two aims: a reminder about one’s own death and the life hereafter which will help the individuals purify themselves; and praying for the deceased for compassion and salvation from God<sup>7</sup>. The Holy Quran, while exhorting the believers about the necessity of yearning for the bliss and ecstasy of the hereafter, asks them to obey God and the Prophet so that they shall be in the company of those whom God has favoured: the Prophets, those steadfast in truthfulness (*siddiq*), the martyrs (*shahids*), and the righteous (*salihoon*), the apogee a believer can attain [2]. These two religious precepts can be discerned as the pretext for evolving the ideology for conducting the *nerchas*. Since the Muslim community generally reveres the popular *awliyas* and consider them among the blessed group mentioned in the Quran, visit to their graves known as *jarams* are deemed to bring blessings in their life. The believers began to utilize these visits to pray to these saints invoking their blessings, instead of the Islamic way of praying for the dead. The Islamic scriptures vehemently forbid supplications other than to God and worship or prayer to any power other than God is considered as *shirk* or polytheism. However, some of the scholars after the Prophet have justified this kind of prayer on the ground that these are actually not the prayers supposed to be done to God, but they are appeals for intercessions and the *awliya* will intercede for the believers before God. Many believe that prayers offered through the intercession of a *vali* are more acceptable than offered direct. They even attribute lots of superhuman powers to the *awliya* and think that they can avert any impending disaster, cure all kinds of illness and bring fortunes and prosperity in worldly life. Chanting hymns in praise of the *awliya* as well as offering (*vazhipaadu*) of money and other materials to them are often thought to be an easy and suitable way to get out of difficulties and to ward off epidemics. This interpretation and the subsequent rulings have provided the ideological foundation for the *nerchas*.

The basic ritual of each *nercha* is usually presentation of offerings at the *jarams*. In most cases the leadership of the *nerchas* is vested with the *thangals* (members of the Sayyid families). Their role in the actual ceremony includes both directing and participating in the presentation of offering. Corporate groups in villages, organizations of the low castes in the Hindu community (known as untouchables in Kerala society), craft guilds and occupational associations bring their gifts in a series of ceremonial processions known as *varavu* or ‘arrival’ [3]. These *varavus* have pre-determined schedules and the procedures which vary slightly from one *nercha* to another. But usually each *varavu* is formally welcomed by a representative of the *Thangal* and is guided to the *jaram* where the various offerings and presentations are held. From the *jaram* the *varavu* team proceeds to the

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<sup>3</sup>*Sayyids* are the descendants of Prophet Muhammed and *shahids* are martyrs who sacrificed their lives in the path of God.

<sup>4</sup>*Awliya* is the plural of *vali*, which means friend or beloved of God. They were believed to be extreme devotees and the Muslims believe that they were very close to God and their prayers and requests will not be rejected by Him.

<sup>5</sup>*Jaram* was the colloquial term for tomb of the revered persons.

<sup>6</sup>*Moulids* are liturgical recitals in honour of the Prophet or a saint

<sup>7</sup>Sahih Muslim, Hadeeth No. 976

house of the senior Thangal where the ceremony of offering is often made before a *nilavilakku*, a tiered metal lamp commonly found in the home of Hindus [4]. The only major exception is that when the ‘untouchables’ arrive, they are not given any formal welcome by the Thangal though their gifts and other presentations are accepted.

As mentioned above, the most important element of the *nercha* is the offerings made at the *jarams*. The offerings are of two kinds: foodstuffs and entertainments like music, dance, *kolkkali*, fireworks, performance of martial arts etc. [5]. Mappilas as well as low caste Hindus actively participate in these offerings. Generally the agricultural products are the major items of gifts, but in some *nerchas* there are particular food items as offerings. An interesting part of the *nercha* in Idiyangara is the offering of *appam* or bread, hence it is known as *Appavanibha nercha* (*appam* -bread, *vanibha* -trade or exchange). The devotees believe that if they are having ailments in any part of the body, they may prepare bread in the shape of such body part and offer it to the deceased Sheikh, and as a result, the disease in that part of the body can be cured [6]. There are some slight differences in the cultural performances in different *nerchas*.

Outside the premises of the *jaram*, the *nercha* has a dimension of fair and commercial centre: a temporary town is made and various kinds of articles are displayed for sale. It provides an occasion for shopping in clothing, toys, bangles, sweets, household utensils, agricultural tools as well as entertainments like carnivals, snake shows, magic shows etc.. Thus, on the one side the *nerchas* provide the people an opportunity to their express religious piety and on the other, they afford them spectacular opportunities for enjoying various kinds of entertainments. These features make the *nerchas* the popular religio-cultural festivals in the land.

While the focus of the *nerchas* is the homage shown to the departed *awliya* or *shahids*, many practices connected with the events are non-Islamic and very often at odds with the principles of Islamic *shariat*. Most of the customs have been borrowed from the indigenous folk festivals related with Hindu temples and local deities. It is explained that the Mappilas could have Islamised the already existing festivals or created new ones by using indigenous ceremonial patterns [7]. Most of the rituals connected with the *nerchas* are similar to those of *pooram* or *velas*<sup>8</sup> practiced by Brahmanic and non-Brahmin communities. Due to the similarities of customs and practices between *nerchas* and *poorams*, *nerchas* seem to be the Mappila versions of *pooram*. There are two reasons for considering *nerchas* as Muslim adaptation of the *pooram* and *velas*. Firstly, *nerchas* like *pooram* and *velas* were seasonal; all three appear to have originated as harvest festivals; secondly, *nerchas* share a common ceremonial pattern with most *poorams* and *velas*. Both *Poorams* and *velas* are held between the month of March and May, the period following the second harvest after the monsoons. The majority of the *nerchas* also take place during this period.

The three festivals have certain common features. *Kodiyettam* or flag hoisting is marked the beginning of these celebrations; the *varavu* accompanied by cultural performances, decorated elephants ridden by men carrying multicolored parasols, elaborate fire work displays, the offering of agricultural produces, folk dances and drums are the most significant elements feature these three fests [8]. The *varavus* and related performances in the *nerchas* can never be substantiated by Islamic scriptures. The active participation of Hindus, though low castes, in various aspects of the *nerchas* also point out to its non-Islamic character. In *Kondotty nercha* the first *varavu* is of the Hindu group of Vellattarakkar of Valluvanadu and the last from the Hindu goldsmith caste of *Swamimath* [9]. In the *Malapporam nercha* which is to commemorate the *Mappila* warriors who were martyred in the battle against Para Nambi, a Hindu feudatory under the rule of Zamorin, the low caste Hindus are always present. These common features and the elements of non-Islamic traditions point out that the *nerchas* and related celebrations are the adaptations of the Hindu festivals by the *Mappila* community.

#### IV. THE INSTITUTION OF MARUMAKKATHAYAM

*Marumakkathayam* or matrilineal system of inheritance was a peculiar social institution practiced in Kerala till the first half of the twentieth century. Basically, *Nayars* and some other lower castes were the followers of this institution. Outside Hindu communities, the Muslims of North Malabar and of coastal towns in South Malabar like Calicut, and Ponnani have also practiced this system. Though there are some disagreements about the origin of this institution among the Muslims, it is widely accepted that *Mappila* matrimony is the result of the conversion of the matrilineal-practicing Hindu communities into the fold of Islam.

*Marumakkathayam* refers to the inheritance and succession in the female line tracing descent from a common ancestress. The ancestral house known as *tharavad* where a large group of people descended from a female living together is the basic unit of this system. In a *tharavad*, the mother and her children, her grandchildren by the daughters, her brothers and sisters and all the descendants on the sister’s side live together sharing a common kitchen and enjoying all the property [10]. The term *marumakkathayam* is derived from *marumakkal* – nephews and nieces through sisters; the word has been coined due to the strange relationship

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<sup>8</sup>*Pooram* was the festival celebrated in connection with temples and *vela* was a seasonal festival held in forest sanctuaries dedicated to non-Brahmanical deities.

between uncle and his sister's children. This is a woman-centered institution that gives protection to them compared to their counterparts in patrilineal families. The female has the birth right over *tharavad* property and this lasts throughout her life, and it's through her that the *tharavad* name gets transmitted from one generation to another. A big *tharavad* is composed of many residents and vast landed properties, which are held in common - joint property of all the members- and partition is not allowed; however, each member has the right for maintenance from it. The children of the male members nevertheless are eliminated from the *tharavad* and they have property rights in their mother's *tharavad* [11]. The *tharavad* membership is acquired by birth.

One remarkable aspect of *marumakkathayam* is that it cannot be called matriarchy, even if it which gives protection and freedom to women compared to their counterparts in patrilineal families. The controllers and decision makers of the *tharavads* are men, despite the fact that families are based on mothers' homes and organized through the female line. Though the property of the family belongs to the females, the *Karanavan* (uncle), the senior most male member of the family, is vested with the management of the property, who has the power and authority to control the property and conduct the social and religious ceremonies of the *tharavad*. Neither his brothers nor the husbands of his sisters have voice whatsoever in the house even in deciding on matters concerning the marriage of their children. On such occasions, their fathers are least consulted and their presence or absence make no difference or least felt in the family [12]<sup>9</sup>. He manages the *tharavad* estate and allocates supplies for the maintenance of the family. Since the initiative for marriage comes from bride's family in *marumakkathayam* families, it is considered as the duty of the *Karanavan* to find the bridegroom for the unmarried women of his *tharavad*.

Though the members claim their descent from the same ancestress, they cannot intermarry. Sisters' children do not inter-marry each other as they belong to the same *tharavad*. Nevertheless, marriages between the children of brothers and of sisters are permitted because though the brothers and sisters belong to the same *tharavad*, their children belong to different *tharavads* [13]. Consequently, the system of a man marrying his maternal uncle's daughter, cross-cousin marriage, has become a usual practice. This cross-cousin marriage is a social insurance and pourboire for the supervision and management of the *tharavad* by the *Karanavan*, that his daughter would be tied up in his own family with a different status to a nephew. However, this restriction on the marital relationships among sisters' children is quite contrary to Islamic principles because blood relationships among the children of one's siblings, whether of or male, is the same.

After the marriage women continue to stay in their own *tharavad*. Their husbands either stay at this *tharavad* permanently or visit there at regular intervals. After marriage he resides in the bride's house as a *Putiyappila* (*putiya* - new and *mappila* - bridegroom). In the new house, a separate chamber called *Ara* is reserved for him where he lives with his wife and children. Usually, the *aras* are set up upstairs. This self-contained and adorned room is exclusively arranged with necessary requirements like furniture including sofa, chair, table and almirah [14]. The decoration of bridal chamber reflects the social status of the *tharavad*; most of the bridal chambers have a side room which is used for dining; attached to the bridal chamber, bathrooms are also built. The bridegroom is always called as '*puthiyaappila*' by all members of the *tharavad* of the bride; he will be referred to by this title throughout his life. He divides his time between his natal *tharavad* and his wife's. This pattern of residence is called duo-local residence ([15]. He visits wife only at night and leaves his personal belongings at her natal house. He spends a relatively large part of his time in that house and gives cash to his wife, a portion of which is usually spent to supplement the family budget ([16]. The position of Beebis of Arakkal royal family of Kannur, the only Muslim dynasty in Kerala history, reveals the authority vested upon Muslim women in matrilineal families. In Arakkal house, the usual practice followed was that the eldest member in the maternal line, whether male or female, succeeds to the throne; and if males, they accept the title *Al iraja* and if females, *Beebi*. Contrary to the fact that Islamic law does not recognize succession through females, in this family succession has several times been through females and the *Beebis*, the senior most ladies have been several times the rulers and managers of the royal chieftaincy [17].

The existence of *marumakkathayam* among the *Mappilas* is a distinctive feature of Kerala society. Islamic society is known to be male centred and it upholds patrilineal system of inheritance; it places the man at the centre, and insists that the men must provide for the maintenance of his family. Providing food, shelter, clothes and other necessities of life for wife as well as for the children is his responsibility and a wife is not expected to share that duty, and he has no right in the income she draws. Thus, it is apparent that something that is not related to the tenets of Islam has caused to its entry into Muslim society. When different castes that had practiced matriliney converted to Islam, they continued their system in the new religion also. Circumstantial factors and its close resemblances with Nayar system of marriage, it can be deduced that the Muslim *marumakkathayamis* a borrowing from the Hindu community. Though the puritan scholars like ShaikhZainuddin, the world renowned Islamic scholar of sixteenth century has decried the believers for their

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<sup>9</sup> The authors write about the Keyi family of Tellichery. However, this was the custom in all matrilinealfamilies.

adherence to matriliney, the society has stuck on this bizarre institution[18]. However, the practice of *marumakkathayam* began to disintegrate in the second quarter of twentieth century, and exist now in a distorted manner.

## V. CONCLUSION

The *Mappila* community is a distinct social group in Kerala which has emerged as a result of the social and cultural interactions between the Arab traders and Kerala people. The *Mappilas* differ from the Muslim communities of other parts of India in many ways: they have developed a distinct cultural milieu which is a composite of Islamic and Hindu religious traditions. Since most of the rural *Mappilas* were converts from the lower strata of the Hindu society and they maintained many of their old customs and beliefs in the new religion along with the newly obligated Islamic rites and beliefs. Many of the converts embraced the new creed not because of their conviction in its doctrinal aspects, but they had found it as an asylum to escape from the agonies and trauma they endured because of their low status in the caste hierarchy. Lack of proper training in the religious scriptures coupled with the indifference and ineptitude of the new entrants made them retain many of their old socio-religious rituals and practices in the new religion. Gradually, some of these customs and practices were given an Islamic re-orientation and became part of the Islamic social system in the region. They came to be presented as Islamic rituals and practices.

The *nercha* is typically a non-Islamic tradition which has no backing in the scriptures. Its resemblance is more with the worship of local deities among the Hindus and contradicts with the monotheistic doctrine of Islam in many ways. Most of the ceremonies and practices in the *nerchas* are not of religious significance but are based on local economic, social and cultural traditions. For the people it is a major event of the year to experience spectacular entertainments, express religious piety and an occasion to purchase various articles. Thus the *nerchas* are rituals combining the various socio-cultural ceremonies of Hinduism with economic and market interests, organized, however, in the banner of Islam. The acceptance of *Marumakkathayam* among Muslims is a strange social phenomenon. The Islamic scriptures stipulate that the man is the head of the family and the maintenance of all the members of the family is his individual responsibility. This accounts for why Islam proposes that the woman has right for half of the man's share from her father's property. At the same time, under *marumakkathayam*, the woman or her *tharawad* has the main responsibility of the upkeep of the family. In fact, this is an alien custom in Islamic jurisprudence. This odd system has entered the Muslim community as a result of their absorption of the native culture, due to the influx of matrilineal communities to the fold of Islam. This is the best epitome of the social adaptation of regional cultural traditions by the Muslim community, indigenization and pluralistic character of the Islamic society though it never accommodates it doctrinally.

Spread over wide areas and in a diversity of cultures, Islam has shown remarkable flexibility by evolving major adjustments and acclimations with local customs and practices, kinship and legal systems, and political and economic structures. This ability to accommodate native cultural elements and ethnic values make *Mappilas* a distinct social group different from the pan-Islamic community.

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